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ABSTRACT

This position paper by the Illinois Association for Personalized Learning Programs (IAPLP) argues that developmental education programs provide the means for improving the quality of education while maintaining equal opportunity and access to higher education. First, a summary of the IAPLP's position on developmental education is presented, along with recommendations concerning statewide and institutional support for developmental education, and the involvement of support services personnel in state and institutional decision making. After a section examining the resurgent national concern for excellence in education, the paper defines developmental education as learning assistance services, special assistance programs, and compensatory education; highlights the place of personalized learning programs within and beyond developmental education; looks at variations in developmental programs; and offers assumptions about developmental students as learners. The next section of the paper focuses on the issue of measuring quality, highlighting measures such as program completion, certification, and job placement rates; increases in grade point averages, test scores, and student persistence, and lowered attrition rates. Next, study findings are cited revealing the extent to which developmental programs in Illinois have achieved quality. A discussion is then provided of the unacceptable alternatives to academic assistance for underprepared students. Finally, the paper stresses the need for the support of developmental education programs as part of Illinois higher education's commitment to quality with equity. (AYC)

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THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Summary and Recommendations

Developmental education programs provide a means for raising the quality of Illinois higher education. Although diverse in adminstrative structure and instructional methods, these programs are unified by a common belief of their personnel: that disadvantaged and under prepared students can succeed when given adequate learning assistance and instruction. Educators in these programs are also acutely aware that quality is essential for success in our society and that mastery of basic writing, reading, computation, and reasoning skills is a prerequisite to achieving quality.

In the current debate over raising standards and striving for quality, educators and students worry that quality will be sought by closing off accessibility. This course would create the illusion that standards have been raised, but it would not improve quality nor would it benefit higher education or the state of Illinois.

Developmental education programs offer a solution for balancing quality and equality. These programs improve the quality of education while maintaining access to higher education. They accomplish this by raising the verbal, quantitative, and reasoning skills of individual students. The result is greater learning efficiency and lower student attrition for underprepared students. Thus developmental education programs allow students the opportunity to succeed. However, developmental education programs can not help students succeed unless these programs have strong administrative support which creates institution-wide commitment. All successful, thriving Illinois programs have administrative support as the basis for the work environment of their personnel.

As support for their unique missions, we recommend the following:

1. Statewide support for developmental education, with each university or college determining the amount and nature of academic support services and basic skills instruction needed by its students to achieve successful matriculation through a degree program.

2. Institutional support for developmental education programs as demonstrated by institutional policies and fiscal allocations that strengthen these programs and make them available to all students identified as educationally disadvantaged or academically underprepared.

3. Involvement of support services personnel in state and institutional decisions concerning admissions standards, assessment and placement, and general policies related to academic assistance.

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THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION IN PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Quality of Education: A National Issue

The resurgent national concern for education focuses attention on achieving excellence. Educators, board members, task forces, and state legislatures hurriedly create proposals for reversing the perceived decline in American education. For Illinois post-secondary education, the responses have included teacher education reforms and collaborative efforts to improve the relationship between high schools and undergraduate programs. Other suggested reforms, such as altering admission and entrance requirements, raise serious concerns whether excellence will be sought through exclusion. A noteworthy quotation from The Nation Responds (the Department of Education follow-up study to A Nation at Risk) echoes the same concern.

> Of all the issues emerging, educators believe that the greatest perseverance will be required to reconcile the traditional emphasis on access with the developing imperative for excellence. They fear that ignoring either goal places enduring national values in jeopardy.

This position paper addresses an essential element of post-secondary education which, for the most part, has been ignored in the response to improving the quality of education: that is, the role of developmental education. Of most importance is the thesis of this paper that developmental education provides the means for improving quality while maintaining equal opportunity and access to higher education.

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Defining Developmental Education and Learning Assistance

Learning assistance services, special assistance programs, and compensatory education and other personalized learning programs constitute developmental education. Developmental education programs include basic academic skills, reasoning skills, and learning strategies taught through content area classes, tutoring programs, and college learning centers (such as math labs, writing centers, and reading labs). These programs work with or include support services such as counseling and academic advising. Likewise, they may work with or be a part of special admissions programs.

Although this statement emphasizes their role in solving the quality-versus-access problem, personalized learning programs, especially college learning centers, provide other important institutional services. In addition to their role as developmental education programs, personalized learning programs handle testing, curriculum development, teacher training, and outreach work. These functions relate to improving educational services and instructional diversity; however, they are not directly addressed in this paper.

Developmental education programs vary greatly in their administrative structure and methods of instructional delivery. On one campus all services and instruction may be delivered through a comprehensive program. Another campus may have several programs with differing functions and clientele, each

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reporting to different departments. What is evident about developmental education is that it is an umbrella term for a variety of instructional programs and personalized services unified by the basic educational assumptions of program personnel. Educators and administrators reponsible for developmental education programs make the following assumptions about students as learners:

- -- learners vary more in their styles and rates of learning than in their ability to learn
- -- learners reach their educational potential at varying ages since intellectual and emotional maturation is a complex process
- -- learners disadvantaged by culture, environment, physical handicaps and/or economics can achieve, given the appropriate set of learning conditions and strategies

Based on these assumptions, developmental educators believe that students deficient in one or more academic area--whether specially or regularly admitted--can succeed in post-secondary education if given adequate basic skills review and support services.

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Measuring Quality

Measuring quality provides the basis for defining educational excellence. Scores on standardized tests are one indication of educational quality. However, for Illinois higher education and its individual institutions, there are additional measures:

-- The number of students who persist at and complete a program of study or training

-- The percentage of program graduates who successfully become certified in their professional or vocational fields

-- The percentage of graduates who find employment related to their chosen career goals

Within each institution of higher education, quality must be measured against standards relevant to the goals of a given program, service, or course of study. In this vein, a developmental education program is considered successful if it does the following, in whole or in part:

-- Raises the grade point average of students beyond those of similar students not availing themselves of the program services.

-- Lowers the attrition rates of incoming students.

-- Produces improvements in learning as measured by pre- and post-test scores.

-- Increases student persistence in a course of study.

Thus developmental education programs demonstrate their success by how well they have raised student competencies and lowered student attrition, and these measures directly relate to and augment college-wide efforts to strengthen academic standards.

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Achieving Quality

A developmental education program which successfully provides academic assistance improves the quality of education by increasing learning efficiency and achievement. For example, studies by the City Colleges of Chicago have shown that students who receive levels of assistance appropriate to their needs will perform as well as or better than students regularly admitted to college programs; in addition, these students will persist at significantly higher rates than students not receiving such focused assistance. Likewise, research studies by the Office of Academic Services of Western Illinois University, conducted for the past nine years, have demonstrated that specially admitted students receiving academic assistance have had probationary and attrition rates equal to or less than regularly admitted students when they are compared at the end of the first and second semesters. Furthermore, the above findings are consistent with studies conducted at colleges and universities throughout the nation. These outcomes for developmental education programs are rooted in one of the principal purposes of these programs--to provide the assistance that students need to succeed in college-level coursework.

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Deceiving Quality: Mediocrity without Opportunity

The alternative to academic assistance for underprepared students is the acceptance of one of two unpalatable alternatives: lowering academic standards or denying access to post-secondary education.

Within a college or university academic system, there can be subtle pressure to dilute standards. Grade inflation offers one example. Some instructors grade on the normal curve, and this curve will rise or fall to meet the level of student competencies. Other instructors, while not grading on a curve, are unwilling to fail a large number of their students. They may feel tacit pressure for grade inflation since low grades can be interpreted as failure in teaching and in the educational system. To avoid this alternative, higher education must seek to improve each student's level of academic competency, thereby eliminating pressures for retention without academic integrity.

The second unacceptable reaction is to allow the waste of human potential by denying access to post-secondary education. At present, a significant number of high school graduates and older returning students enter post-secondary institutions academically underprepared in several basic skills areas. Often two to three courses in basic skills and/or six hours of tutoring will provide the needed assistance. In other cases, students require the assistance of a more comprehensive program of developmental studies and academic support.

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To deny thousands of students the opportunity of post-secondary education because of the lack of some of the many required academic skills is to accept the waste of human potential. Changing admission requirements, such as the completion of selected high school courses, will not, in itself, improve quality since high school curricula vary. Furthermore, the current direction toward raising college baccalaureate admission standards without increasing support for developmental education programs will have the effect of locking out the disadvantaged. Thus increasing admission requirements without a commensurate increase in learning assistance would seem to violate a fundamental goal of American higher education: to allow each citizen to reach his or her potential.

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Providing Quality in and Access to Illinois Higher Education

Mandates suddenly foisted under the banner of quality and excellence tend to make us feel honorable and noble. We easily forget that at the end of every mandate are the lives of students--students seeking access to higher education, to jobs in an increasingly technological society, and to the self-esteem granted by a degree. Before changes are hurriedly mandated, educators and representatives of professional associations must be consulted. They work most closely in the daily instruction of the economically and educationally disadvantaged. Developmental educators have a professional concern for raising academic standards, and they are a source of working knowledge on how quality can be measured and obtained.

Acceptance of the role of developmental education can be demonstrated only by true support. Of course, the easiest to identify is monetary support. Specifically, for two year institutions this means greater funding for disadvantaged student programs and for remedial courses. For four year institutions, it means greater institutional and federal monetary commitment to programs and services delivering academic support and assistance. However, the most important support is that displayed by the policies of governing boards, chief executive officers, and administrators. Illinois higher education policies must be examined carefully in terms of their impact on the disadvantaged or underprepared students. Moreover, administrators at each institution must examine the educational values inherent in their decisions.

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Finally, the role of developmental education might best be described in another quotation from The Nation Responds:

> The National Commission on Excellence in Education recognized that special support and attention should be provided to particular groups at risk. . . . The Commission was convinced that the solution to the apparent dilemma of pursuing both equity and excellence lay in a system of institutions and values that encouraged everyone to perform at the boundaries of individual ability in ways that tested and extended personal limits.

Perhaps the surest sign of Illinois higher education's commitment to quality with equity would be the existence of strongly supported developmental education programs. Given the needed support, these programs will assist post-secondary institutions in raising academic standards without the loss of accessibility or academic integrity.

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